

# Lumen Gentium: The Unfinished Business

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## Abstract

Using *Lumen gentium* as a focus, what can we say about the unfinished business of renewal? How does it work, and how must we read *Lumen gentium* in order to grasp “what remains to be done”? We consider four issues, each of them in dialogue with one of four theologians who reached their 60<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1964, the year *Lumen gentium* was completed. Bernard Lonergan helps us come to terms with the historically conditioned nature of *Lumen gentium* itself. Karl Rahner points the way towards a better grasp of *Lumen gentium*’s discussion of the place of other religions in the economy of salvation. John Courtney Murray’s influence on the Council fathers is a case study in the importance of the local church. And Yves Congar’s willingness to rethink his own positions testifies to the importance of not making *Lumen gentium* into unchanging truth. Overall, the unfinished business of the document on the Church is to learn to treat it, in Lonergan’s words, as “not premisses but data.”

## Keywords

Lumen Gentium, *Aggiornamento*, *Ressourcement*, *Pluralism*, Salvation

If Pius X had been a little more Herod-like and if he had had his own Magi to forewarn him, there might have been a second massacre of the innocents in 1904. It was not a good year for theologians, but it was a positively outstanding year for newborns destined to be great theologians, babies who would celebrate their sixtieth birthdays the year that the Council Fathers at Vatican II finally ratified *Lumen gentium*. Just imagine the heartache that Cardinal Ottaviani might have been saved if there had never been a Bernard Lonergan, a Karl Rahner, an Yves Congar and a John Courtney Murray! No method in theology, no horizon of mystery, no lay people in the Church and no freedom of religion. Bliss would it have been, for some, to be alive in that particular gloom. To remain the old Church would have been very heaven! Transcendental Thomism would have fizzled out, *la nouvelle*

*théologie* would never have needed naming, and the Council Fathers would have been without one particular American Jesuit to help them come to terms with modernity. Indeed, it is possible that there might have been no Council at all and *Humani generis* might have been the last word. Or perhaps it would have been the one-session council that the Curial party's damage-control apparatus fervently desired. And perhaps I am overstating the importance of these four individuals, because there were others who might have carried the torch in their absence – de Lubac and Daniélou, Philips and Suenens among others – but one cannot deny that the face of twentieth-century Catholic theology would have been quite different without them. Suenens and Ottaviani could agree on that!

The term “unfinished business” is context-dependent, or perhaps “genre-specific” would be a better term. If my task is the collection of the dues of a learned society, then the unfinished business is the finite process of completing a series of more or less identical tasks. If I am building a house, I may be looking to finally getting the roof on and the electrical circuits up and running. If I am playing chess, I want to win as elegantly as possible. But ah, if I am somehow a participant in sacred history, am I engaged in making progress or in just doing more of the same, whatever the same might be, while God brings it all about? Am I actor or observer in the coming of the kingdom? So the unfinished business of *Lumen gentium* all depends on what we think *Lumen gentium* is, what the council of which it was the lynch-pin is, and what the story of the Catholic Church in recent times has been, into which this episode and this document fits. In other words, approaching the unfinished business must wait upon determining the genre of the document and the story of the Council. In *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* Joseph Komonchak examines Vatican II as an “event,” and makes the point among many others that “an event has meaning only within a series,” and the series is indefinite.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the meaning of the Council as a whole or indeed a single document or happening within it is a product of its place in a sequence of events. But, and here's the rub, who is to determine when the sequence begins or ends, because upon that decision rests the kind of story in which it has its place, and hence its meaning? This may sound distinctly postmodern, but even within the modernist's belief in a beginning, a middle and an end, the point is still telling.

While these are all interesting and important questions, I want in this paper to explore the question of unfinished business in a slightly

<sup>1</sup> “Vatican II as an ‘Event,’” in *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* edited by John W. O'Malley (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), pp. 24–51. Here on p. 36 Komonchak is quoting from Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), p. 41. The three other essays are by O'Malley himself, Stephen Schloesser and Neil J. Ormerod.

different way. What I am going to suggest is that if we approach the question of unfinished business with “the idea of progress” as our rubric, we end up in the hopeless wrangling about “the meaning of the Council” that O’Malley’s collection of essays is intended to surmount. Progress or regress, renaissance or destruction, this is the language of most debate about the fortunes of Vatican II, and it is a dead end for the simple reason that history, sacred or secular, does not conform to the patterns that great modernist historiographers like Hegel or Marx imagined it did. So I am going to ask how we can look at unfinished business in a different way, employing not the language of reform or revolution or destruction, but rather that of *renewal*. Using *Lumen gentium* as a focus, then, what can we say about the unfinished business of renewal? How does it work, and how must we read *Lumen gentium* in order to grasp “what remains to be done”? To aid me in this task I shall call upon those four babies from 1904, Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner, John Courtney Murray and Yves Congar. Each in his way can lead us through some of the aporia of the *Lumen gentium* debates, and even the confusion over what is living and what is dead in Vatican II. Collectively, they suggest a way to continue the unfinished business, though not, of course, to complete it.

### Theology in Its New Context

“Theology has become an empirical science in the sense that Scripture and Tradition now supply not premisses, but data.” (Bernard Lonergan)<sup>2</sup>

It is a commonplace of commentary upon the Council documents that they are masterpieces of compromise. Because they were the work of so many who inevitably had different views on this, that or the other thing, and because they were written to produce overwhelmingly favourable vote-counts, they seem often to be taking back with the left hand what they have just so generously given with the right. *Lumen gentium* provides examples of just such a disposition, none better than what we find in the order of chapters in the text. Of course, as is well-known, the original order of themes in the early drafts of the document gave way to something quite different, especially in the decision to treat the whole “People of God” before the various divisions within the Church, in line with LG’s fresh emphasis on the importance of baptism. Similarly, the placing of the chapter on “the universal call to holiness” before that on religious life addresses the longstanding implication that somehow the life of the evangelical

<sup>2</sup> B.Lonergan, *A Second Collection* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), p. 58.

counsels is a higher calling than that of Christian living in the secular world. But what are we to make of the placing of the chapter on the hierarchical character of the Church before that on the laity, and how should we assess the significance of the first sentence of the chapter on the laity, clearly placing them outside “the hierarchy”? What, in other words, is the balance – if indeed one can be found – between a vision of the Church as “the whole People of God” and one of it as a community clearly divided into those who are the hierarchy and those, the laity, who are clearly not? On a more detailed though perhaps more significant level, how do we reconcile the sublime theological meditation of chapter one, in which “the Lord Jesus inaugurated his Church by preaching the Good News, that is, the coming of the kingdom of God,” with the mechanical and unhistorical account in the opening paragraphs of the chapter on the hierarchy, where Jesus “sets up the holy Church” by calling apostles and willing that “their successors, the bishops namely, should be the shepherds in his Church until the end of the world”? Indeed, how scriptural is the claim that “in order that the episcopate itself, however, might be one and undivided he put Peter at the head of the other apostles, and in him he set up a lasting and visible source and foundation of the unity both of faith and of communion”?

Bernard Lonergan’s work helps us to make sense of the two competing theologies evident in the pages of the council documents. Lonergan identifies the earlier form of theology as one that came into existence at the time of the Enlightenment. This “dogmatic theology” emerged in opposition to the scholastic theology which it supplanted and “it replaced the inquiry of the *quaestio* by the pedagogy of the thesis.”

It demoted the quest of faith for understanding to a desirable, but secondary, and indeed, optional goal. It gave basic and central significance to the certitudes of faith, their presuppositions and their consequences.<sup>3</sup>

In the twentieth century and especially at Vatican II a new form of theology, like the old in that it is “locked in an encounter with its age,” has emerged. The new theology is empirical rather than deductive, local and particular and evolving rather than adhering to classicist values of universality and permanence, and accompanied by a new vocabulary and imagery. The Aristotelian conceptual apparatus has gone out of fashion and very quickly “the vacuum is being filled with biblical words and images, and with ideas worked out by historicist, personalist, phenomenological, and existential reflection.”<sup>4</sup> Most important in what Lonergan identifies as the empirical approach is the recognition of historicity. The earlier dogmatic theology talks

<sup>3</sup> *A Second Collection*, p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> *A Second Collection*, p. 60.

of human nature and analyses the human person in terms of soul and body. The new theology “adds the richer and more concrete apprehension of man [sic] as incarnate subject.”<sup>5</sup>

If we employ Lonergan’s notion of the human person as “incarnate subject” in a critical analysis of the idea of the Church in *Lumen gentium*, we can begin to see some of the unfinished business. Just as when we look at the human subject in the drama of history we find ourselves face to face with the question of meaning, so when we see the Church as a kind of collective incarnate subject in history, we are similarly open to the play of historical forces. In our age, says Lonergan, we have come to see that the human subject is formed by acts of meaning, that they proceed from free and responsible persons, that meanings differ from culture to culture and nation to nation, and that in the course of time they change and they may go astray. Just so, the Church is not a given, preserved from historical vicissitudes. Because the Church is surely to be seen by Christians as vital to the implementation of God’s salvific will, it does not follow that its passage through history is planned out by God. There is divine oversight from all eternity, but a design is not a plan. God is not a planner.<sup>6</sup> The Church is constituted anew by multiple human choices and actions, beset by national and cultural differentiation, open to change and even to decay.

The unfinished business of *Lumen gentium* to which Lonergan leads us to attend is not, then, the struggle between the classicist and the more modern approach to the meaning of Church, so much as the historicity of *Lumen gentium* itself. *Lumen gentium* as an event in a story is not about the triumph, temporary or permanent, of a liberal mid-twentieth-century vision of Church over the post-Tridentine, neo-scholastic model. Rather, *Lumen gentium* is the demonstration of the never-ending story of historical accident. The unfinished business of *Lumen gentium* to which Lonergan alerts us is that of its own contingent and non-programmatic character. The importance of *Lumen gentium* lies neither in the proclamation of theological novelty nor in the reiteration of timeless truths, but in its facticity as testimony to historical change. Change, not progress. The unfinished business of LG is a clearer understanding of how theological business is, of its nature, unfinished. What it leaves unclear is its own provisionality, and here there is something of a self-contradictory quality, for we can so easily slip into thinking of the significant reforms promoted in LG, like the place of the laity in the Church, the

<sup>5</sup> *A Second Collection*, p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> Planning is a temporal activity, and God the creator does not plan history, or there would be no human freedom. God’s design allows for human planning, of course, but planning – like any activity in history, even that of God within history – is contingent, accidental, and open to failure.

understanding of episcopal collegiality and the focus on baptism and mission as so self-evidently superior to what they replace that they can be embraced as, finally, timeless truths for our time. But *Lumen gentium* is “locked in an encounter with its age,” time-constrained and historically-conditioned in its conclusions, but programmatic in its demonstration that theology isn’t just a product of the theological tradition, “but also of the cultural ideals and norms that set its problems and direct its solutions.”<sup>7</sup>

Loneragan cannot, of course, leave the new theological historicism without some kind of foundation, located in a method found not in prescriptions but in “the grounds that govern the prescribing.” The scientific analogy to what he is seeking in the religious realm would be something like Kuhn’s “paradigm shift,” that fundamental change to a new model of understanding which seems to come out of nowhere, though hindsight will reveal it as the mysterious result of painstaking research, and which legitimates itself in the spur it gives to further creativity. In religion, as is well-known, Lonergan identifies this as the moment of “conversion.”

[Conversion] is not merely a change or even a development; rather, it is a radical transformation on which follows, on all levels of living, an interlocked series of changes and developments.<sup>8</sup>

This conversion occurs in the incarnate subject, but it can surely also be an aspect of the Church as a collective incarnate subject. The Council’s awareness of the importance of history is nicely captured in its own phrase, “reading the signs of the times,” a phrase found in *Gaudium et spes* (4), and not in *Lumen gentium*.<sup>9</sup> But there is a connection between the two, *Gaudium et spes* enunciating the norms and strategies for engagement with the world, *Lumen gentium* having provided the account of ecclesial conversion. Thus a further aspect of the unfinished business of *Lumen gentium* is to be cognizant of its own status as an act of ecclesial *metanoia*. The change of heart, however, is not to a liberal perspective rather than a conservative one; instead, it is to the historicist recognition that the meaning of the Church is negotiated anew in each age, in encounter with the age. Hence the significance of the shift from the static notion of a “perfect society” to the dynamism of the historical People of God. This ecclesiological insight makes attention to the age normative, but

<sup>7</sup> *A Second Collection*, p. 58.

<sup>8</sup> *A Second Collection*, pp. 65–66.

<sup>9</sup> A second essay in the O’Malley collection (see n. 1 above) brilliantly analyzes the Council as an event of twentieth-century history. In the midst of continuing difference and disagreement, symbolized in the more or less exact coincidence of the opening of the Council and the Cuban missile crisis, *Lumen gentium* sees the Church as a sign and focus of unity. See Stephen Schloesser, ‘Against Forgetting: Memory, History, Vatican II’ in O’Malley, pp. 92–152.

does not make the insights generated in a particular age normative. What caused the demise of the classical model was not its particular judgments, some of which were and remain valuable, but its denial of history. In tying itself to a particular age it tied the hands of the gospel and denied its “productive noncontemporaneity,” to use Metz’s ugly but insightful phrase.<sup>10</sup>

### The Coming of the World Church

One of the biggest interpretive puzzles of *Lumen gentium* is the question of how it understands the relationship between the Church, other Christians and the great world religions. The puzzle, indeed, is largely of its own making, for there are a number of statements that are quite hard to reconcile. There is, of course, the notoriously ambiguous claim that the one Church of Christ *subsists in* the Roman Catholic Church, which is read by some as a generous openness to the saving significance of Christian denominations beyond the Catholic tradition, while for others it apparently makes clear that it is the Church of Rome alone that possesses the message of salvation in its fullness. In the end the two sides here more or less agree on the facts, but the fear-factor leads them to differ on whether the ecumenical cup is half full or half empty. Of more significance might be the challenge of reconciling the bald statement that “the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation” (LG 14) with the evident commitment to the notion of the universal availability of salvation to be found in LG 15:

Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the Gospel and given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life.

While this passage continues to insist that it is through Christ that all are saved, nevertheless it imagines divine grace reaching non-Christians through their own religious traditions, and unbelievers through their human goodness.

This picture of the universal will to salvation in *Lumen gentium* is rightly associated with the influence of Karl Rahner, but not in an uncomplicated way. For Rahner, as usually represented, the fact of God’s universal salvific will revealed in Holy Scripture and the fact that most human beings in history have not known the Christian God

<sup>10</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, ‘Productive Noncontemporaneity’ in Jürgen Habermas (ed.), *Observations on The Spiritual Situation of the Age: Contemporary German Perspectives* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1985), pp. 169–180.

leads to the inescapable conclusion that this majority are saved in Christ, but through their own traditions. While this in itself is a challenging claim on a number of fronts, it becomes the more interesting when we place it alongside Rahner's well-known utterance that in the Second Vatican Council we see "the coming of the world church."<sup>11</sup> The clear proclamation of a belief in the universal availability of salvation, if Rahner is correct, coincides with the end of European cultural hegemony in the Catholic Church, or at least with the beginning of the end. Rahner recognized its tentative nature and was suitably prescient about Roman efforts to stem the devolutionary tide. Nevertheless, he appears to offer a stronger reading of the words of LG we quoted above, when he says that they imply "the possibility of a properly salvific revelation-faith even beyond the Christian revelatory word."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps Rahner let his famous guard down a little here, implying, it would seem, that not all of God's grace has to be seen as mediated through Christ. He seems to go well beyond his "anonymous Christians" and, if he were alive and saying something like this today, might well suffer the same fate as his Jesuit brother, Roger Haight.

LG is ambiguous about the role of the Catholic Church relative to God's will to the salvation of all. But the very ambiguity is the point. Indeed, the famously overwhelming majorities with which Council documents were approved might be a sign of the Council Fathers recognizing the ongoing and unfinished nature of the debates, just as much as, if not more than, the usual explanation that the documents were so equivocal that there was something for everyone to vote for. It is hard to read LG and not see a clear reiteration of the doctrine that the one Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church. But it is also hard to read it and not see glimmers of "the possibility of a properly salvific revelation-faith even beyond the Christian revelatory word," suggested by Karl Rahner. It is also quite hard to see how the two can be smoothly reconciled.

If one of the characteristics of LG is its open-endedness on a whole variety of issues, whether we like this measure of ambiguity or not, its treatment of the universal availability of divine grace is crystal clear. The debates at the Council and in subsequent decades do not put the fact into question, only the matter of its relationship to the Church as the sacrament of salvation. LG as an act of the Council is also an act of the emergent world Church. Rahner makes this point very clearly, arguing that even though LG tends to be answering European problems in a European way, nevertheless it does "proclaim a

<sup>11</sup> Karl Rahner, S.J., "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II" in *Vatican II: The Unfinished Agenda*, edited by Lucien Richard, with Daniel Harrington and John W. O'Malley (New York: Paulist, 1987), pp. 9–21.

<sup>12</sup> K. Rahner, *The Unfinished Agenda*, p. 14.



universal and effective salvific will of God which is limited only by the evil decision of human conscience and nothing else,” and therefore that in comparison with previous theology in general and the Neo-Scholastic mind-set of the original council schemata, “basic presuppositions for the world mission of the world Church are fashioned which were not previously available”.<sup>13</sup>

With regard to the coming of the world Church and the operations of the “universal and effective salvific will of God,” the unfinished business of LG is to keep the conversation going. The challenge to this task does not come from those who wish to assert the position maintained in *Dominus Iesus*, or at least not *because* they maintain that position, but from those who wish to foreclose the discussion and terminate the emergence of a truly world Church in which European intellectual or theological hegemony would not be taken for granted. The position of the present pope is instructive in this regard. Problems arise not so much because of his commitment to *Dominus Iesus*, even with its ungenerous vocabulary of deficiency, but with his generally Eurocentric focus, as illustrated so clearly in the Regensburg address.<sup>14</sup> The red herring of pointless hurts to Muslim sensibilities aside, the general tenor of the address is a ringing endorsement of the heritage of Greek thought. When we peel away the layers of the inculturational onion we will find at the heart, thinks Benedict, not the end of the onion but a kernel of Hellenist philosophy and theology. It is hard not to see this as an assertion that Athens escapes the historical condition, and with it the theology of the Roman Catholic Church.

### The Role of the Local Church

If we were to try to draw up a list of those teachings of Vatican II that seem in the intervening years to have been more honoured in the breach than in the observance, that of the collegiality of the bishops would be very high on the list. From the notorious *nota praevia* attached to the text of LG at the express order of the pope, whether Paul VI intended to protect an overwhelming “yes” vote or to undercut the Council’s teachings, to the evisceration of the Rome Synod of Bishops that Paul had at first seemed to favour, to John Paul II’s clever but destructive distinction between “affective” and “effective” collegiality, all have conspired to subvert LG’s evident intention to put the bugbear of conciliarism to rest. LG attempted to finesse the delicate balance of papal and conciliar authority by

<sup>13</sup> *The Unfinished Agenda*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>14</sup> The text of the Pope’s address is widely available, for example, at <http://www.zenit.org/article-16955?l=english>.

expressing them as two manifestations of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Together with the third way the Spirit guides the Church, the so-called *sensus fidei*, these three cannot legitimately be in competition with one another, for the Spirit cannot be at war with itself. Nor, as befits a Trinitarian analogue, is there any priority among the three, though difference is surely present. We might say they have different roles in the economy of the Church, but *in esse* they are nothing more than the one power of the Holy Spirit, watching over God's Church.

As time has elapsed since the Council's work, it has become more and more apparent that the discussion of collegiality is an instance of a more fundamental concern, that of the balance between the local and the universal Church. One would have thought that the Council Fathers' resounding opinion that a bishop becomes bishop in virtue of his ordination and not by some papal act of delegation would have set this issue to rest, not to mention LG's firm insistence that the local church possesses all the elements of the whole church and is not a branch office of some ecclesiastical transnational. That this is not the case has been apparent in the extraordinarily frank exchanges over the last ten years or so between Cardinal Walter Kasper, champion of the priority of the local church, and Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, patron of the priority of the universal church.<sup>15</sup> The open-ended nature of this particular debate, though it has ceased since Cardinal Ratzinger became pope, is in itself a part of the ongoing unfinished business of LG. Extreme conciliarism and extreme papalism both attempt to foreclose debate and fail to recognize the delicate balance that LG sought to express. Indeed, the decline of the fortunes of collegiality and of the legitimate autonomy of the local Church in the last two or three decades is a product of efforts to frustrate the intentions of LG. LG did not seek, let us be clear, to overturn the papalism of Vatican I in favour of return to the Council of Constance, but tried very hard to put both Pope and Council in a pneumatological context. The unfinished business of LG is to strive to keep the delicate balance alive.

Whether one is committed to the priority of the universal over the local church or the opposite, however, one can still value the special contributions of local churches, destined to become increasingly

<sup>15</sup> Kasper took on Ratzinger initially in a book chapter, 'Zur Theologie und Praxis des bischöflichen Amtes,' in *Auf neue Art Kirche Sein: Wirklichkeiten—Herausforderungen—Wandlungen* (Munich: Bernward bei Don Bosco, 1999), pp. 32–48. Ratzinger responded in an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* for December 22, 2000, p. 46. Kasper argued further in 'On the Church: A Friendly Response to Cardinal Ratzinger,' *America* 184 (April 21–30, 2001), and was answered yet again by Cardinal Ratzinger in *America* 185 (November 19, 2001). The easiest approach to this complicated set of exchanges is provided by an excellent overview from Kilian McDonnell, 'The Ratzinger/Kasper Debate: The Universal Church and Local Churches,' *Theological Studies* 63 (2002), pp. 227–250.

apparent to the degree that the Catholic Church is becoming more and more a world church. Ironically enough, at Vatican II the local church whose culture had the most impact upon the Council documents was the American Catholic Church, which is certainly not what comes to mind when we think of an emerging world church. Yet, it is hard not to see the significance of the American democratic experiment in the Council decree on religious freedom, and not easy to overestimate in particular the contribution of John Courtney Murray SJ to the sea-change that came about in the Catholic Church's understanding of its place in democratic societies. But when we explore in more detail, we discover that the insights of American democratic life actually return us to deep-seated Catholic roots. And nothing could provide us with a better example of the symbiotic relationship between the local and the universal church proclaimed in LG than Vatican II's treatment of freedom of religion. The then Cardinal Ratzinger was right to insist that the universal Church is not simply a federation of local churches. LG said as much. But Cardinal Kasper was equally correct to point out that there is no universal Church aside from or prior to the local churches of which it is composed. What neither of them seems to have considered, but which may be important to our consideration of unfinished business, is the extent to which local churches, reflecting their cultures, might take on somewhat different external forms from one another.

The genius of John Courtney Murray's influence on *Dignitatis humanae* is the way in which the document reflects the wisdom of American experience with religion and democracy, while formulating its discussion of religious freedom in terms not of rights or conscience but rather as an application of natural law. Nineteenth-century continental European suspicion of the so-called Americanist heresy was fuelled by the assumption that the disestablishment of religion entailed its restriction by and subordination to the power of the state. In the United States, however, separation of powers was a mechanism developed to provide for the free exercise of religion and to keep religion in general and that of the majority in particular from undue influence in secular government. But Murray's influence on the Council Fathers leads them beyond this kind of pragmatic argument to one in which the divine law requires individuals to seek truth, especially religious truth, but this search "must be carried out in a manner that is appropriate to the dignity of the human person. . .namely, by free enquiry"(DH 2).

It is a curiosity to which not enough attention has been devoted (Joseph Komonchak is an honourable exception here<sup>16</sup>) that Vatican II in general and *Lumen gentium* in particular represent not so much a

<sup>16</sup> See Komonchak, 'Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism', *Cristianismo nella storia* 18 (1997): pp. 353–385.

struggle between a premodern and a modern church as one between two distinguishable strands of modernism. In *Lumen gentium's* openness to the future and in *Dignitatis humanae's* forceful advocacy for freedom of conscience in religion we can see Enlightenment values at work, values which, as Charles Taylor has pointed out, are values the Church needed to learn from modernity itself.<sup>17</sup> In the resistance to these conciliar priorities we encounter another modernity, described by Komonchak as the effort to harness elements of modernity to create a “counter-modern church” whose authority “represents a classic illustration of that self-conscious, rationalized, and bureaucratized mode of thought in which Max Weber saw the distinctive mark of modernity.”<sup>18</sup> Taylor, on his part, puts the resistance to the openness of modernity down not to Christianity itself, but to “the project of Christendom: the attempt to marry the faith with a form of culture and a mode of society.”<sup>19</sup> So, more important than the details of *Dignitatis humanae* is the relationship established between the teaching of the universal Church and the culturally-conditioned contribution of any local church, in this case that of the United States of America. Attention to the local church as a culturally-distinct contributor to the reality of the universal church is a defence against Christendom and a challenge to bureaucratized thinking.

Once again, we see that the unfinished business of LG is not to decide for the local church against the universal church, but to maintain the two in right relationship to and in delicate balance with one another. The effort to foreclose the open-ended debate does not come from those who want to give some priority to the universal church, or at least not because they want to give such priority, but from those who cannot see the futility of the Christendom project. We should also remember that modernity itself, which so colours the liberal “wing” of the Council fathers, is not far from Christendom in its unthinkingly hegemonic assumptions about the perspectives of Western culture. Here, where modernity shades into postmodernity and the local and particular have voice over the universal, beyond metanarratives about the triumph of the West, of Christendom or of the Church, may be where we find the free space in which to continue the unfinished business of walking the tightrope between anarchic particularism and authoritarian universalism. We should not have to choose between the good of the part and the good of the whole.

<sup>17</sup> *A Catholic Modernity: Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture*, edited by James L. Heft (New York: OUP, 1999), pp. 13–37, esp. pp. 16–18.

<sup>18</sup> Komonchak, p. 383.

<sup>19</sup> Komonchak, p. 383.

## A Dance to the Music of Time

Anthony Powell's English response to Proust, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, displays the historical realism of narrative without closure. In its unwillingness to tell a story equipped with beginning, middle and end, the theology of LG is much more like this than we might imagine. Like Powell's great work, an awful lot is happening of great interest and relevance to the moment, but it's not rushing towards some *dénouement*, perhaps not even going anywhere in particular. It is the journey, not the arrival, that is the point. As Komonchak has suggested, on the inside of history we can tell about as many stories as there are starting-points from which to choose. From a point within the pattern, the overall design cannot itself be determined. For someone like Powell, there is no design for all is chance. For a theist there has to be a design if not a story, but even for the theist it cannot be discerned from within. Only from a God's eye view is it visible. For this reason if for no other, the faith of the believer, the faith of the Church, is not so much faith in a particular discernible end to history, but rather fidelity to hope in God's saving design for us. Eschatological hope is not utopian longing.

To think of Vatican II as an event in a series bounded by an eschatological horizon allows for the emergence of the genuinely novel without the expectation of progress towards an intra-historical terminus. The reign of God is all around us, within history, or constantly breaking into history, but not exactly being constructed as an historical phenomenon. The Church, as both proleptic of the reign of God and a sacrament of the reign of God, can engage in reform or revolution, and should perhaps do so from time to time, though not in order to make more progress. Change in the Church is renewal or, perhaps better, refreshment. Refreshment takes place, in Lonergan's term, when the Church is "locked in an encounter with its age," reading the signs of the times and striving to be for its own time that community within which the transcendent is celebrated and hoped for, in an eschatological rather than a historical horizon. Both *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes* see the Church in this way. We are a pilgrim people, says LG, but the pilgrimage we are on is directed to the reign of God, not to a historical utopia. We travel in hope and if we lose our way for a time it will not be because the map went missing, but because we forgot the kind of journey we were on. Perhaps we thought there was just one way to go, or some kind of short-cut to get "there," wherever "there" is. Christendom, neo-scholasticism, a centralizing papacy, these are all so many misdirections for the pilgrim people not because they are conservative or "on the right" on some ideological spectrum, but because they have forgotten that eschatological hope, while it is within history, is not hope in any historical fix. The healthiest moments in Church history

have been those where divine providence has not been mistaken for historical progress, indeed where we as a people have not been so sure where exactly we are “going,” if we are “going” anywhere at all. To a degree, our postmodern world with its suspicion of universal reason and controlling metanarratives offers the Church a way beyond the instrumental rationality of modernity with which it has been infected. And when we look back with apparent nostalgia to the early church, the church of the first three centuries, it should not be because we think they had everything right or they were more liberal than we are or more conservative than we are. An historical judgment would suggest that they had many challenges to their own self-understanding and almost literally did not know where they were going. But lack of clarity meant only that everything except eschatological hope in the reign of the kingdom was in question. It is in this sense, quite unromantic, that the early age might be a model for us now.

The terminology that *Lumen gentium* reflects for addressing the meaning of the Church is that of *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*. While *aggiornamento* is often translated as “bringing up to date,” the connotations have more to do with a sense of renewal and refreshment than modernization, a term that inevitably implies the sense that we know better now. John XXIII’s often-quoted remark that he wanted to open the windows and “let in a little fresh air” exactly captures the sense of *aggiornamento*. And though *ressourcement* is rightly translated as “return to the sources,” we are being invited to refresh ourselves in lively springs of water, gushing out of the ground and not to bury ourselves in some mouldy library basement filled with outdated answers to questions no longer asked. *Ressourcement*, for the most part, means to revisit the inspiration of the great Fathers and Mothers of the Church, each of them distinguished by their clear commitment to an encounter with their own age, whether it be an Origen or an Augustine or an Aquinas, a Teresa of Avila or an Elizabeth Johnson. In each and every case, *ressourcement* means reading them in their own historical context, not as some stultifying system. They are, in Lonergan’s felicitous phrase, “not premisses, but data.”

There was no better twentieth-century exponent of the balance between *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement* than Yves Congar, who championed the movement of *la nouvelle théologie*, devoted as it was to the re-historicizing of Christian tradition in the face of neo-scholasticism and the aftermath of the Modernist crisis. It was, indeed, the prominent Neo-Scholastic Dominican theologian Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange who sarcastically labelled Congar, Chenu and others as the “new theologians” and who aided Pius XII’s attack on them in his 1950 encyclical, *Humani generis*. Garrigou-Lagrange’s hatred for them, not too strong a word, was due as much to the plan of

study of the Dominican seminary Le Saulchoir, outlined by Chenu in a privately-circulated manuscript in the late 1930s,<sup>20</sup> a text which led to his eventual removal from the seminary and long-term exile to Canada,<sup>21</sup> as it was to any work by Congar, Daniélou or de Lubac, the other primary objects of his wrath. Chenu's schematic outline of the course of study at Le Saulchoir stressed reading tradition in a historically-sensitive manner, an approach which raised once more the shibboleths of the Modernist witch-hunt.

While Chenu arguably had the greater influence on *Gaudium et spes*, it was Congar whose thought ran through and through the text of *Lumen gentium*. The stress on the central significance of the baptismal priesthood, the prominence of the role of the laity, the historical recall of episcopal collegiality, the location of ecclesiastical authority in the work of the Holy Spirit, all can be traced to Congar's ideas in his great work of the early Fifties, *Jalons pour une théologie du laïc*.<sup>22</sup> He was by no means the only one – Gérard Philips was another<sup>23</sup> – but Congar's was the single biggest influence. However and somewhat ironically, the completion of LG coincided almost exactly with a radical revision in Congar's own ecclesiology.

While there are a number of areas of unfinished business in LG, some of the more important of which we have touched on in this paper, the way in which Congar addressed his own and LG's treatment of the laity as "secular" is instructive for the way in which unfinished business needs to be conducted. In the original edition of *Lay People in the Church* Congar had written of the laity as those who do God's work in the world, those for whom "the substance of things in themselves is real and interesting," while the cleric is the one "for whom things are not really interesting *in themselves*, but for something other than themselves, namely, their relation to God."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> It was Chenu in this text who really developed the idea of the importance of "reading the signs of the times," and it was Chenu who had the greatest influence on the text of *Gaudium et spes*, a text declared too optimistic and to underplay "the cross" in favor of "the incarnation" by both Joseph Ratzinger and Karl Rahner. The text of *Le Saulchoir: Une école de théologie* is most easily obtainable as reprinted in a book by the same name, which also includes interpretive essays by Giuseppe Alberigo, Etienne Fouilloux, Jean-Pierre Jossua and Jean Ladrière, with a brief postscript by Chenu himself (Paris: Cerf, 1985).

<sup>21</sup> There is an amusing essay to be written on the various places of exile to which suspect French theologians were sent in the 1950s. Not for them any Devil's Island, unless the theological equivalent of such might be Canada (Chenu), Cambridge, England and later Jerusalem (Congar) or, most improbable of all for a Frenchman, Daniélou's internal exile from the Jesuit house of studies at Fouvrière near Lyons to Paris(!), where he became chaplain to a girl's *lycée*.

<sup>22</sup> Paris: Cerf, 1953. ET: *Lay People in the Church* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957).

<sup>23</sup> *The Role of the Laity in the Church* (Chicago: Fides, 1956).

<sup>24</sup> *Lay People in the Church* (1957), p. 17.

In LG this becomes a reference to the “secular character” which is “proper and peculiar” to the laity, and “by reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God’s will.”<sup>25</sup> By this time Congar was revising his work to take account of criticism that he failed to break away from the clergy/laity division, and increasingly he began to write about “different ministries” rather than different classes of people. By the end of his life he could comment on the earlier Congar as someone who had fallen into the trap of defining the laity relative to the clergy, and go on to make the quite different claim that “today it is the case, rather, that the clergy need to be defined in relation to the laity, who are quite simply members of the people of God animated by the Spirit.”<sup>26</sup>

The example of an architect of LG having second and third thoughts about his own earlier ideas, ideas which influenced the text of the Council document, brings us to a final dimension of the unfinished business, which is not to canonize the particular insights of LG. If *aggiornamento/ressourcement* is the theological method of refreshing the Church, it is the method rather than this or that particular judgment that needs to be the focus of unfinished business. Times change, and if theology is “locked in an encounter with its age,” then theological insights which were important at one time may take a back seat at another.<sup>27</sup> Once again, looking at things this way puts the typical representation of the Postconciliar era as a stand-off between liberals and conservatives into question. While conservatives are undoubtedly at fault if they tie themselves to a historically-conditioned theological system as if it were exempt from historicity, liberals can similarly be endangered by clinging to the insights of LG as if it were about to become the new dogmatics. LG is not “the truth.” It is an effort to refresh the horizon of eschatological hope for a particular age. Fifty years on, its ideas have not been fully-implemented in part because of ecclesiastical intransigence, in part because fifty years means that some of the ideas are already dated. Times change, and the final unfinished business of LG may be to declare it both an historical document whose time is beginning to be past, and a glorious effort to demonstrate the restoration of historical awareness in official theology. LG is “not premisses but data,” and its unfinished business is the recognition that its business

<sup>25</sup> LG 31.

<sup>26</sup> The comments are recorded in *Fifty Years of Catholic Theology: Conversations with Yves Congar*, edited and introduced by Bernard Lauret (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), p. 65.

<sup>27</sup> On the volatility of theological truths, there is no better analysis than that to be found in John E. Thiel, *Senses of Tradition: Continuity and Development in Catholic Faith* (New York: Oxford, 2000).



– the business of theology – is and must be unfinished. The only final certitude is God's, and our access to it is not theology, but eschatological hope.

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